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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
28 June 1977

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The OAS General Assembly and the Human Rights Issue

Delegates to last week's OAS General Assembly in Grenada returned home convinced of the depth of Washington's commitment to the defense of human rights. The conference, in fact, turned out to be a battleground for the US human rights policy and almost all of the discussions were devoted to it. Even though the delegates have been thoroughly sensitized to the issue, however, the outlook for progress in curbing human rights abuses is still mixed at best.

The thirteen nations voting for the US initiative on human rights were Panama, Jamaica, Barbados, Surinam, Grenada, Costa Rica, Trinidad, Mexico, and Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Venezuela, and Peru. Seven of these countries are from the Caribbean. Five are countries visited by Mrs. Carter in early June. The southern cone countries of Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay abstained--a polite "no" vote--as did Guatemala, Colombia, and El Salvador. Honduras, Nicaragua, and Bolivia did not vote.

It has been apparent for some time now that US spokesmen, including Mrs. Carter, Secretary Vance, and Ambassador Young, have been getting the human rights message across to the Latin Americans. The doubts about Washington's long-term seriousness on the issue have given way in many cases, in fact, to concrete action by several of the countries to curb the worst abuses. For example, Chile claims that it has freed its last political prisoner. While the OAS was in session the Chilean government also negotiated a settlement of a hunger strike, staged by families of missing persons, that had been in progress at the United Nations ECLA

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headquarters in Santiago. Argentina and Brazil have directed security forces to be more circumspect when arresting suspected terrorists. Paraguay is again talking about inviting the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to make an onsight inspection in Asuncion.

These positive steps, however, do not mean that the OAS community will soon develop a unaminity of views on the human rights issue. Although no country would ever voice opposition to the defense of human rights intrinsically, the reasons for the negative votes continue to be fear of political and economic destabilization caused by communism and terrorism. The psychological and real factors are unlikely to go away in the near future. In fact, it is conceivable that some of the countries voting with the US on this issue may be faced in the future with a security problem which could lead to systematic violations of human rights. Haiti, for example, already has one of the worst records in the hemisphere on human rights. Politically-related violence is already common in Jamaica, always threatening in Panama, and never far from the surface in the Dominican Republic. Haiti's vote for the US resolution is difficult to understand except for Ambassador McGee's explanation that the Haitians had decided to vote yes on everything that came up at the meeting.

Although we do not have much hard evidence, the positive vote by Jamaica, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela could well have been influenced by Mrs. Carter's visit to these countries. More than likely, however, other considerations were just as important. Even though Mrs. Carter reportedly was assured by Jamaican Prime Minister Manley that he would support the US on human rights, Manley was effusive in his praise for President Carter on the human rights issue well before Mrs. Carter's trip. Moreover, Jamaica sorely needs US financial assistance now. Costa Rica and Venezuela, two of the few practicing democracies in Latin America, would be expected to support the US, as would Mexico.

An Ecuadorean spokesman has said that his country's vote for the US resolution stemmed from a sincere belief in human rights. Another Ecuadorean said, however, that Quito has an ambivalent attitude toward the issue because it could be construed as interference in internal affairs. He added, however, that the government had decided to support the US

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policy before Mrs. Carter's visit and could not change its position even if it wanted to. Both denied that the possibility of acquiring arms from the US was a factor in their vote, but the Ecuadoreans are again inquiring about US aircraft. In the case of Peru, the positive vote was not out of character with the Morales Bermudez government. Peru has generally supported public declarations of human rights and it is believed that the US declaration on human rights will be incorporated into the new Peruvian constitution.

The support for the US position by Barbados, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Surinam, Grenada, and Trinidad-Tobago was not unexpected, but Jamaica had to put pressure on the Grenadans in order to get their vote. Progress in the canal negotiations certainly was a factor in winning Panama's vote.

In the final analysis, the Grenada meeting of the OAS may be remembered in the future as the beginning of a new era of understanding between the US and Latin America or it may do down as the final dissolution of the special relationship most Latin American countries have long assumed they enjoyed with Washington. Despite the US victory on the human rights issue, the voting pattern raises disturbing questions. The southern cone countries remain a solid intransigent bloc, with Brazil emerging as a leader of this faction and exerting its influence to a certain extent over Bolivia and Colombia. The US is thus left with solid support from Mexico, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and the Dominican Republic among the Spanish-speaking countries. Continued backing for US initiatives from the English speaking Caribbean appears to be tenuous at best and may, in the long run, be contingent on how forthcoming Washington is in providing economic assistance.

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